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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

DOCUMENT NO. 5

NO CHANGE IN CLASS. ☐

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9 October 1957

STAT

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence

SUBJECT: Near East Reactions To Developments In The Syrian Situation 1/2

1. Situation in Syria: The coalition which consolidated its position in Syria in August remains in control and domestic opposition elements are inactive and virtually impotent. External pressures have probably helped knit the coalition together and have considerably strengthened its position within the country, as well as among the other Arab states.

2. Stresses and strains are still evident within the coalition, and individual members are mending their fences and seeking to probe the weaknesses of their rivals. Differences have been reported between Army Intelligence Chief Sarraj and Army G-1 and Deputy Chief of Staff Nafouri, who have been at odds before. Sarraj, however, still appears to be the stronger and to have more support within the Army. There is probably some difficulty between Haurani, chief of the Arab Socialist

1/ See SNIE 36.7-57, "Developments in the Syrian Situation", 3 September 1957.

2/ This memorandum has been cleared with appropriate units of O/CI and D/DP.

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Resurrection Party, and those military members of the governing group most disposed to support the Communists. Khalid el Azm, the Minister of Defense, is seeking alliances among the military. General Bizri, the only coalition member known to have Communist affiliations, enjoys some power as a result of his position as Chief of Staff, but he is still probably of secondary importance within the coalition. Khalid Bakdash, the Communist Party leader, probably continues to exert personal influence but remains on the fringes of the coalition. The Communist Party is currently playing no active political role and is probably suffering from factional disputes.

3. These current maneuvers for position within the coalition, however, are probably not indicative of an impending breakdown or change in coalition policy. Although there may be rivalry for dominance between the more moderate and the more extreme members, all agree generally on the goals and methods of radical Pan-Arab nationalism. The coalition is likely to retain something like its present form so long as external pressures continue to bear on Syria. Furthermore, it is likely to continue its policy of strengthening Syria by deals with the Soviet Bloc.

4. The Syrian coalition has drawn steadily closer to the Soviet Bloc. It has, however, possibly on the advice both of Nasser and the Soviets, asserted its Arabism, nationalism, neutrality, and willingness to

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improve relations with the West. It has almost certainly not granted to the Bloc privileges which could be interpreted legally as abrogating Syrian sovereignty and the Bloc has almost certainly not requested such privileges. There has been, however, a growth of Syrian confidence in the Bloc and increased dependence upon the Bloc which could lead Syria unawares into a state of vassalage. Moreover, the Bloc is establishing in Syria installations which might at some later date be employed as physical extensions of its own power.

5. The Arab reaction to Syrian developments: The initial reaction of conservative Arab leaders in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon to the events of August in Syria was unfavorable. They saw in Syria the threat of the further spread of Nasser's radical revolutionary doctrines and another extension of Soviet imperialism. On the other hand the vast majority of the Arabs who are radical nationalists accepted Syrian charges against the US and approved Syria's reasons for its deals with the Bloc. At this point there was a division within the Arab world on the Syrian situation because the issues were stated in terms which divided the conservative from the radical Arab nationalists.

6. During September the Syrians, aided by Egyptian and Soviet propaganda, emphasized their claims that they were being subjected to Western threats and pressures. The Arab public was led to believe that

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Western "imperialism" was again at work and that the US was challenging Syria's right to handle its internal affairs without outside interference, and its right to arm itself against the threat of Israeli invasion by accepting arms from any source. While the conservative leaders continued to be concerned about radicalism and Soviet imperialism in Syria, King Saud and the Iraqi Premier felt obliged to make public gestures honoring the Arab tradition of solidarity.

7. Saud and Jawdat were probably largely motivated by the hope that they could exercise a moderating influence and alter or slow down the march of events in Syria. They probably also sought an alternative to forceful intervention, which they feared would lead to the involvement of Israel and the great powers and jeopardize their own regimes. Furthermore, they recognized that they could not afford to alienate large numbers of their own citizens who sympathized with the cause of radical Arab nationalism in Syria.

8. Reactions to the US position with respect to Syria: The Arab reaction to the US position on Syria must be read against the background of the Arab interpretation of the US relation with Israel and with Western "imperialism". An important factor in this pattern continues to be the Arab failure to understand or credit the American concern.

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over Communism and Soviet imperialism. Thus the Syrian, Egyptian, and Soviet propagandists were able to convince the Arab majority that the objectives of US policy with respect to Syria were:

- (a) to change the Syrian Government to one more favorable to the West;
- (b) to prevent the Syrian defense build-up;
- (c) to stir up Syria's neighbors to intervene; and
- (d) to pull the area into the East-West conflict.

The task of the propagandists was made easier by the general belief that the American claim that Syria was Communist-dominated, or about to become so, and the American suggestion that Syria's Moslem neighbors were fearful of invasion by Syria were false. Although most conservative Arab leaders were in disagreement with this popular rendition of the American position and were inclined to take private measures to support their conservative aims, they were cautious in doing so for fear of being branded as pro-Western.

9. Reactions to the Soviet position: For the most part the Soviet position has been regarded by Arabs as "correct." They have accepted Syria's claims that there was no abrogation of Syrian sovereignty. Soviet assurances to Syria and the warning to Turkey were regarded as proper responses to what they believed were Western threats of intervention. Area opinion regarded the Soviet naval visit to Latakia and Gromyko's statements on the Middle East as appropriate rejoinders to Sixth Fleet maneuvers and American statements on the dangers in the Syria situation.

10. Reactions of individual Arab governments: Nasser may be concerned about the instability and inexperience of the Syrian coalition and fear

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that it may not be as skillful in dealing with the Soviets. However, he almost certainly approves the general line of Syrian developments and, in any case, knows that he must give it public support or lose stature in the Arab world. He probably encouraged President Kuwatly to return to Syria and exert a moderating influence and may be responsible for the attempts by the Syrian Government to play down its Soviet connection and emphasize its nationalist and neutralist interests. Nasser, however, is almost certainly much excited about "Western pressures" on Syria and is ^{as} as anxious/anyone to use the situation to force Saud and the other conservative Arab leaders to acknowledge their solidarity with the Arab community on issues in which that community is lined up against the West. To date Syrian developments have been generally favorable from Nasser's point of view. He is, however, probably anxious to take the spotlight off Syria for a time and exert additional pressure upon the conservative Arab leaders to line up with him and the Syrians. An armed conflict with Israel would accomplish both these objectives, but since Nasser is not yet ready for war he is more likely to think in terms of challenging Israel in the field of psychological warfare. For example, by proposing, perhaps with Soviet backing, a settlement of the Palestine boundaries on the basis of UN resolutions.

11. Saud, who among the conservative rulers is most anxious to maintain a front of Arab unity and to avoid charges of treachery to the Arab cause, is also most confident of his ability to rally moderate elements and exert a calming influence upon extremists throughout the area. His visit to Damascus in September was probably devised for those

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purposes. He has sought to make contacts with moderate elements in Syria and has certainly advised a cautious course. It is unlikely, however, that Saud can change the course of events in Syria.

12. The visit of the Iraqi Premier to Damascus in September was almost certainly on his own initiative, but it probably reflects a general Iraqi desire at this time not to be caught in a line-up against the majority of the Arab states. Awareness of strong sympathy for the Syrian position among the majority of Iraqis and uncertainty about domestic public security was probably a factor in Ali Jawdat's decision to make a public gesture in favor of the majority Arab position.

13. Too deeply committed against the Syrian coalition and its policies to change course, but unable to do anything about the situation, both the Jordanian and the Lebanese Governments have sat on the sidelines hoping someone else would take the initiative. Neither, however, has been able to resist the temptation to hedge its bet. The Jordanian Deputy Premier, for example, in commenting to the press on the spectacular delivery of American arms by air gave his approval to the principle that a small state in danger must take arms from whatever source is available and implied that Jordan would take Soviet arms if American arms were not forthcoming.

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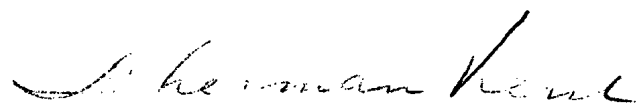
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14. Israeli Reaction: Israel immediately assessed the developments in Syria of August as a threat to its own security and to Western interests in the area. The Israeli Government recommended rapid intervention to overthrow the coalition and establish a conservative government, but recognized that it could not itself take part in such an action without creating formidable political complications. Israel has apparently taken military precautions against the chance of hostilities and is probably in a position to take such military action as it deems necessary upon short notice. Israel has been critical of Western hesitance to deal forcefully with the Syrian situation and is probably planning for a preventive military action in Syria should Syrian military capabilities appear to be approaching its own.

15. Turkish reaction: Turkey has from the beginning regarded the present coalition in Syria and its connection with the Soviet Bloc as a challenge that must be met. The Turks are probably inclined to favor active and forceful means to solve the Syrian problem, but they are unlikely to act without assurances of support from the US and they are probably aware of the difficulties of making a military action in Syria politically successful without extensive Arab participation, which now appears unlikely. The Turks have recently held military maneuvers on the Syrian border and will probably remain prepared to initiate military action in Syria.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:



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